

For Commencement, Northern Kentucky University, 2009

by Wendell Berry

Commencement speakers conventionally advise the graduates that they must not think of the end of school as the end of education: They must continue to think of themselves as students and to study and learn for as long as they live.

I agree with that, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. I am now obliged to say to you graduates, not only that your education must continue, but also that it must change. It is necessary to say to you, moreover, that the institutions that so far have helped to educate you are going to have to change. As loyal alumni and responsible citizens, you are going to have to help them to change, even as you change yourselves.

I am taking the theme of this talk from my friend Wes Jackson of the Land Institute in Kansas, who has said, correctly, that our system of education until now has had in effect only one major: Upward Mobility. Now, Wes says, a second major needs to be added, and the name of this major will be Homecoming.

The Upward Mobility major has put our schools far too much at the service of what we have been calling overconfidently our “economy.” Education has increasingly been reduced to job training, preparing young people, not for responsible adulthood and citizenship, but instead for expert servitude to the corporations. There has been an ongoing feeble objection to this reduction, but most people have been willing to ignore or tolerate it, or even applaud it, despite the obvious dangers. Now, however, the failure of the economy and its subservient institutions has become too obvious to be denied. We are now facing a hardship long deferred. We have no choice but to do better.

That our economy has been enormously destructive has been evident for many years, and nowhere has this been more evident than here in Kentucky. The occupation of this state by people predominantly European began 234 years ago. In so brief a time we have destroyed or blighted or used up far more of the state’s natural bounty than good care for as many years could restore. Most of this damage has been done, and at an ever-accelerating rate, during my lifetime. Much of what we have destroyed is gone forever. The fossil fuels that we have so regardlessly extracted and burned cannot be unburned. The topsoils and forests and watersheds destroyed by mining will not be replenished in a time imaginable by humans. Virtually all the original forest is long gone, and much of the regrowth has been abusively logged. Virtually all of our

streams are polluted, and we are contributing our share to the pollution of the earth's atmosphere. Erosion has carried away immense tonnages of soil from our farms and woodlands, which are increasingly threatened also by invasive plants, insects, and diseases. All this we have so far accepted as normal effects of our economy. But at present rates of use and abuse, it is impossible to suppose that our state will remain inhabitable for another hundred years. We have tried—or tried again—the experiment of building urban prosperity by the impoverishment of the countryside and its people, and inevitably we have failed. The result has been impoverishment that is both rural and urban.

Now we have seen that this economy, which has “externalized” so many and such extreme costs to our land and people, is on its own terms a failure. It is not, in fact, in any respectable sense an economy, but rather a financial system based on easy credit, cheap energy, overconsumption, unsupportable “development,” waste, fantasy, “bubbles,” and sometimes on nothing at all. It is now undeniable—though some will attempt to deny it—that we are involved deeply and intricately in an economic disaster, in which the production of monetary wealth involves the destruction of necessary goods. Even if the climate were ideal and perfectly stable—even if we had an inexhaustible supply of cheap, portable, non-polluting fuel—our present economic assumptions and practices would ruin us. Upward mobility, as we now are seeing, implies downward mobility, just as it has always implied lateral mobility. It implies, in fact, social instability, ecological oblivion, and economic insecurity.

To have founded an enormously expensive system of education on the premises of, and in service to, such an economy has been a mistake, calling for a long, arduous work of revision. If authentic hope is to survive in our present circumstances, education will have to change, and by “education” I mean self-education and the work of schools, either or both. “After all,” wrote the great Canadian ecologist Stan Rowe, “well-educated people, not illiterates, are wrecking the planet. Schools and universities are morally bankrupt [and] most research is worthless busywork . . .” I would add that some research is worse than worthless; it contributes directly to the wrecking of the planet.

The change that is called for is a shift from the economy to the ecosphere as the basis of curriculum, teaching, and learning. That is because the ecosphere is inescapably the basis and context of any possible economy. The proper goal of education, according to Stan Rowe, is “understanding what it means to be human in a living world.” He says further that “We should be asking how the things we construct . . . connect us to the enveloping Ecosphere . . . [D]o they love the ground on which they stand?” And he calls our attention to “the process whereby organisms get established in place, making themselves partners with air, soil, water and other organisms.”

This process, for humans as for all other living creatures, is local adaptation. We know that local adaptation is a necessity for the survival of all species: They either adapt to their places, or they die. How is it that our learned teachers and researchers have exempted our own species from this stark choice?

If schools will not prepare students for this choice—or for this process of local adaptation that Wes Jackson appropriately calls *homecoming*—then their graduates will have to acquire such an education for themselves. But eventually the schools, and their students, and their graduates, are going to see that *homecoming* is not an elective. It is a requirement. We could call it *Emergency Ecological Training*.

Such an education will require acceptance of locality—what Stan Rowe called “home place”—as the context of study, thought, and work. This in turn will require

humility, a virtue not encouraged or esteemed by the modern arts and sciences. But the major in homecoming will not make us intellectual heroes. It will begin, and end, with a confession of ignorance. For we all are ignorant in varying degrees of where we are, of what we need to do to stay there, of what we need to do to assure that our children and grandchildren can stay there. And so the homecoming curriculum will be a curriculum of questions such as the following:

- 1— What has happened here? By “here” I mean wherever you live and work.
- 2— What should have happened here?
- 3— What is here now? What is left of the original natural endowment? What has been lost? What has been added?
- 4— What is the nature, or genius, of this place?
- 5— What will nature permit us to do here without permanent damage or loss?
- 6— What will nature help us to do here?
- 7— What can we do to mend the damages we have done?
- 8— What are the limits: Of the nature of this place? Of our intelligence and ability?

Obviously, these questions cannot be answered—and they are not likely to be asked—by a specialist, or by many specialists working in isolation. They *can* be asked, and eventually answered to a significant extent, by a conversation across the disciplinary boundaries. This would not be a conversation with a foreseeable, or even a possible, end. It would be carried on necessarily in the face of forever changing conditions and circumstances, leading to further revelations of ignorance, and thus to necessary refinements or changes in the agenda of questions.

This conversation would collapse the rigidly departmented structure of our present academic and professional system into a vital, wakeful society of local communities elegantly adapted to local ecosystems.

If this conversation ever should take place in our schools, academic life would be jolted out of the doldrums of “the industrial model” into a new birth of freedom and purpose. Teaching would resume its old sense of neighborly duty and responsibility. Research might rise above commercial and professional preoccupations and achieve the dignity of honorable study—study, this time, serving the survival of species, including our own.

You graduates will have to work for such a change in the schools for the sake of generations to come. But you will have to work for such a change in yourselves, reading and conversing and living across the disciplinary boundaries, for your own sake, for the sake of your own homecoming. This effort has already been started for you by the many people all over our country, and all over the world, who are working for local economies that are authentically conserving. Beyond its benefit to the survival of a good, beautiful, and livable world, this work of homecoming has a lot to recommend it. It is endlessly interesting, and endlessly productive of decent, undamaging pleasures.